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## Exploring Young Children's Social Identities: Performing Social Class, Gender and Ethnicity in Primary School



This briefing summarises the findings from my PhD research conducted as part of my doctoral studies at the University of Edinburgh between 2010-2015.

### What this research is about

In times of increasing diversities and inequalities, I was interested to explore how young children live their social identities in the context of a primary school. In particular, with this project I wanted to investigate the significance of social class, gender and ethnicity in the children's identities and relationships.

### How the research was conducted

This study is based on an ethnographic research with a group of approx. 25 children aged 5-7 in a primary school in a Scottish city. This means that over the course of a school year, I have spent time with the children and staff, observed their interactions and relationships, and asked them questions. I wrote fieldnotes of my daily observations and have conducted interviews. My thesis is based on the analysis of this data, together with a review of the relevant literature.

The study has received ethical approval by the University of Edinburgh Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethics Committee, and by the education department of the local authority in which the research took place.

**No real names of any children, staff, the school or the local authority in which this research took place are mentioned on any publications, in order to keep the identities of those who took part confidential.**

# Findings: what I have learned from this study

## Social class, gender and ethnicity are important in young children's identities and relationships

While young children are sometimes seen as 'too innocent' or 'too naïve' to be concerned about these issues, this research showed that social class, gender and ethnicity *do* play an important role for their identities and relationships.

Children are aware of general ideas and stereotypes about class, gender and ethnic identities. They also actively contribute to how such ideas and stereotypes come to be constructed and contested.

- **Social class** plays an important part in children's lives. This can be through *material/economic* elements (for example, clothes, accessories, lunch boxes, types of food or Christmas presents). *Symbolic* elements of class are also important, through the ways in which such objects and practices (for example, wearing a coat of a certain brand, or where a family goes on holiday) are given particular values. This can have an impact on the children's standing in their peer groups.
- **Gender** is highly significant in most interactions in the school context. There are different ways in which children live their femininities and masculinities, but most children are also aware of dominant stereotypes of what it means to be 'a boy' (e.g. being strong and independent) or 'a girl' (e.g. being gentle and compliant). Dynamics between girls and boys are often competitive. Although girls and boys play together, close friendship groups (such as 'best friend' couples) are generally of the same sex.
- **Ethnicity** features in children's interactions through talking about languages, countries of origin/ nationalities, food, religion and knowledge about cultural practices. Talking about skin colour appears to be tabooed, although the children are not 'colour-blind' but aware of differences in skin colour and their powerful social implications. Ethnicity is often downplayed in friendships between children from different ethnic backgrounds, and emphasized between children from similar ethnic backgrounds.

## Children's identities intersect and lead to complex forms of belonging and being excluded

In everyday life at school, social class, gender and ethnicity *all* play a part for the children's identities and relationships – along with other aspects such as age, sexuality, interpersonal relationships etc. Depending on the contexts and interactions, different aspects of identities may be foregrounded or silenced. Particular identity '*intersections*' produce complex and ambivalent forms of belonging and being excluded (Crenshaw, 1991)<sup>1</sup>. For example, children may belong to multiple groups at the same time, or they may belong in terms of some aspects of their identities but be excluded in terms of others.

Children also engage in the '*politics of belonging*' (Yuval-Davis, 2011)<sup>2</sup> by constructing groups of 'us' and 'them', and drawing boundaries around certain forms of belonging which may exclude

1. Crenshaw, K. 1991. Mapping The Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, And Violence Against Women Of Color. Stanford Law Review, 43, 1241 - 1299.

2. Yuval-Davis, N. (2011) The Politics Of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations, London: Sage Publications.

others (e.g. if someone did not speak Urdu they were not ‘allowed’ to claim a Pakistani identity). *Emotions* play a significant role for how social identities are given meanings and are invested with values.

## Different identities can privilege or disadvantage children

Some social identities can privilege children, for example by allowing them to ‘fit in’ and comply with the school’s expectations in terms of classed, gendered and ethnic ways of being. Other social identities can disadvantage children, for example when being excluded by their peers on the basis of not wearing the ‘right’ classed and gendered clothes, or when not being able to comply with pressures of academic performance.

## Children need to balance multiple identities between home and school

Despite taking place only within the setting of the primary school, this study highlighted the importance of parental networks and wider communities beyond school for the ways in which the children live their social identities. Parental networks play a key role for organising home visits, birthday parties and sleepovers, which impact on the children’s relationships within school.

For some children, differences in identities, expectations and practices between home and school were particularly pronounced: They talked about this in terms of balancing ‘different worlds’ or distinguished clearly between ‘in and out of school stuff’. The children navigated the intersections of home and school in various ways, by disclosing or concealing different aspects of their identities in different situations. Some children shared aspects of their home lives very openly, while others preferred to keep this more ‘secret’ or separate.

## Implications for policy and practice

### Schools need to acknowledge that inequalities in society exist, and challenge them

Schools do not exist in isolation, but are shaped by wider social, institutional and policy contexts. This means that also children do not live their identities in a vacuum, but their lives are shaped by these wider contexts. This study has showed that it is important to reflect on the ways in which social class, gender and ethnicity are constructed in policies and practices. Also the ways in which staff think about, and address questions of diversity and inequality are important for how children come to experience their own and others’ identities.

Despite their significant efforts to create equal and socially just environments, schools are not isolated from wider structural inequalities and therefore need to be places in which these inequalities are actively acknowledged and challenged.

### Practitioners need to be sensitive to the complexity of children’s backgrounds, and make sure that *all* identities are valued

Particularly in the current climate of political austerity and rising anti-immigration and Islamophobic sentiments, schools play a crucial part in countering discriminatory and divisive social attitudes. Therefore, it is important that schools are environments in which all aspects of children’s identities are valued and promoted. Schools need to address and challenge social divisions in order not to

marginalise some aspects of children's identities, or some groups of children.

This means that sometimes 'treating everyone the same' helps to value all children, but sometimes 'treating everyone the same' can also make *some* children feel excluded. While it is important that staff promote children's competence and independence, it is also important to recognize that children's choices and actions (their 'agency') are shaped by their relationships and environment. Therefore, children cannot be held personally responsible for all aspects of their identities and choices (e.g. their attainment in school, their access to resources outside school etc.).

## Practitioners need to challenge discriminatory attitudes and problematic identities

Practitioners need to reflect on how their own decisions and practices may be influenced by their social class, gender and ethnic identities, and how this may be perceived by different children. It is important to challenge dominant *gender* stereotypes, and the ways in which they pervade relationships in the school context. Equally, *social class* differences need to be explicitly acknowledged and addressed, as well as those aspects of *ethnicity and race* that produce experiences of inequalities for children and are not captured by celebratory, multicultural practices.

## A reflective practice needs to create spaces for debate and discussion about children's intersecting identities

Many policies at national, local authority and school level aim to address questions of social differences in schools, often using a language of 'celebrating diversity' and 'tackling inequality' (e.g. Getting It Right For Every Child). However, it is not always clear what 'celebrating diversity' and 'tackling inequality' mean in everyday life at school, and many questions arise for educational practice:

- How can differences be recognised and celebrated without simultaneously reproducing inequalities?
- How can an environment be created that is both celebrating social identities and challenging inequalities?
- Which aspects of social identities and inequalities should be prioritized in policy and practice?

Through paying detailed attention to everyday interactions in the school context, this study suggests that there can be no 'final' answers or guidelines on how to promote social justice in relation to social class, gender and ethnicity. Each situation may require different dimensions of social justice to be prioritised, and sometimes pursuing one dimension may lead to inequality in other ways (e.g. ensuring that both girls and boys spend equal amounts of time at the literacy table may mean that differences between working and middle class children are not addressed) (Gewirtz, 2006)<sup>3</sup>.

This research therefore emphasises the need for a reflective practice that acknowledges the complexity and sometimes contradicting nature of social justice approaches, and creates spaces for discussing the intersecting aspects of children's identities.

3. Gewirtz, S. (2006) Towards A Contextualized Analysis Of Social Justice In Education. *Educational Philosophy And Theory*, 38, 69-81.

## Children should be involved in discussions about identities, diversity and inequality

Finally, this research has showed that young children are aware of, and contribute to, the ways in which social class, gender and ethnicity are lived in identities and relationships. This means that children are also competent to be involved in discussions about their own and other people's identities, and about questions of how to celebrate diversity and tackle inequalities. Therefore, it is important to adopt participatory and child-centred approaches in policies and practices in order to address these questions in meaningful ways *with* children.

## Thank you

I am very grateful to all the participants – children and staff – of the school in which this research took place, for allowing me to spend time with them and learn from them. I would also like to thank my supervisors Professor Liz Bondi and Professor Kay Tisdall for their continued support and guidance.

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## Further resources

More information, contact details and resources from the Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland (CERES) can be found here: <http://www.ceres.education.ed.ac.uk>

More information about intersectionality and childhood and youth studies:  
<http://www.intersectionalchildhoodsandyouths.com>

Arshad, R., Wrigley, T and Pratt, L., (eds) (2012) Social Justice re-examined: Dilemmas and Solutions for the Classroom Teacher. Trentham Publications.

Derman-Sparks, L. and Olsen Edwards, J. (2010) Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves. National Association for the Education of Young Children Washington, DC.

## Contact

If you would like more information about this research or if you have any comments or questions, I would be happy to hear from you:

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